

Concord-Alewife Planning Study

Meeting Notes: April 24, 2003 Committee Meeting

Committee Members Present: Patricia Amoroso, Joseph Barrell, Doug Brugge, Peg Callahan, Pat Goddard, Hom Sack, Ann Tennis

City of Cambridge Staff: Susan Glazer, Stuart Dash, Iram Farooq, Catherine Woodbury, Taha Jennings

Consultants: David Dixon, Ron Mallis, Herb Nolan, Liz Langley, Terry Szold

Welcome & Introductions

After welcoming Committee members, Susan Glazer gave an overview of the planning process and the objectives for that process. In particular, she highlighted the role and responsibility of Committee members to work with staff and the consultants and to make recommendations. She noted that zoning recommendations would go first to the Planning Board and then to the City Council, while non-zoning recommendations would go to the City Manager for consideration in the city's work program.

It was agreed that the last 10-15 minutes at the end of each Committee meeting would be devoted to public comments and people were requested to keep their comments to 2-3 minutes to stay within the allotted time. In addition, written comments can be offered on the back of each meeting's agenda, and will be incorporated into the meeting notes.

While introducing tonight's meeting as an opportunity to address some of the overall observations and concerns regarding the study area, Susan also noted that a more in-depth look at transportation would be on the agenda for a future meeting.

Iram Farooq noted that publicity about each public meeting is delivered via flyers to property owners within the study area; individuals on the mailing list; and past meeting attendance lists.

CommitteeCommitteeCommittee meetings are publicized through the City's online calendar at .

Review of the Public Meeting

David Dixon set the stage for the evening's discussion by making two broad observations in response to two areas of concern:

- Regarding the process:
 - Need to articulate vision and a believable implementation strategy.
 - Development in study area is inevitable as economy straightens out.
 - Challenge of fragmented land ownership; does not preclude zoning and financial incentives from encouraging owners to do move in the direction that we want them to.
- Regarding "hidden agendas":
 - City has multiple agendas, as do Committee members.
 - Critical that agendas be transparent and thereby enrich process.

Review of Public Meeting Working Sessions and Emerging Development Observations

Ron Mallis reviewed emerging overarching principles from public meeting:

- improving the amount of paved surfaces and the impact on adjacent open space resources,
- improving the public realm and creating connections that respond to people's desire lines,

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- making transitions in scales that respond to the adjacent areas or transit accessibility,
- recognizing that higher value will likely come through implementation.

Iram Farooq noted that “higher value” means not only the additional value to developers through higher value land uses, but the sense that future uses will have value added for people because they have been defined by the Committee as the desired uses for the area.

David Dixon expanded on the emerging principles:

- By freeing up paved surfaces, encourage structured parking.
- Encourage dramatic positive change by creating new and rich public realm.
- Enable easy movement back and forth with new streets, easier access to T.
- Envision new development as generating both a new street grid and opening up possibilities for a new mix of uses and densities at the back of the Quadrangle.
- Clearly separate Highlands from the westernmost part of the Quadrangle.
- Review zoning mix to determine how current landowners might share in multiple benefits.
- Re: New possibilities for Blanchard Road:
 - o Creating a real pedestrian realm with sidewalks and trees in people's front lawns (perhaps a direct benefit from developers within the Quadrangle.
 - o Creating a landscaped feature at the corner of Blanchard and Griswold as a visual tactic to slow cars.
- *Doug Brugge: what would be necessary to underwrite this development.*
 - o David responded that there is a link between the value derived from an improved public realm or bridge and the price tag for developing here.
 - o David also pointed out that with increased transit accessibility, zoning regulations can be amended to decrease parking requirements, thereby freeing developers up to put dollars toward public realm improvements
 - o Terry Szold noted that there are certain steps the city can take in terms of making use regulations less generic – an easier step than implementing density bonuses.
- *Doug asked about the total number of parking spaces in the area currently and how the vision would change that number.*
 - o David noted that there are ways of dealing with parking, including a cap on the number of spaces a developer can build, traffic demand management, and planning for uses that minimize parking/traffic impacts.
- *In response to the idea of planting trees in yards on Blanchard Road, Peg noted that while it is a nice idea, with the amount of traffic there, those that are there are not in good shape.*
- *Ann Tennis noted that she liked the idea of transition and would like to work with something like this. She remarked about how she is quite amazed about the amount of housing in the area. She noted that Rafferty Park is to remain a tot lot.*
- *Hom Sack would like to see the bike path moved off of Concord Ave and onto the land fronting Fresh Pond.*
- *Pat Goddard noted concern about the difficulty that new residential buildings in the area are having in filling vacancies.*
 - o David pointed out that our real objective should be to get development to happen in a strong economy. Doing so really allows us to maximize desirability.
- *As a business owner, Joseph Barrell Quad's ease of access as reason for locating there; concerned about the feasibility of what was being proposed, how a road going through someone's property could be implemented, and what the effect on business displacement would be. He recognized we're talking about change over time, but noted*

that it seems overwhelming and that perhaps time and money might be better spent to improve connections and make more subtle changes.

- David responded that there are certainly actions that can be taken immediately. Need to provide benefits to the property owner with land where the road might go, and to the owner with a developable site. Important that every owner keeps the development rights that go with his/her property, and that there might be incentives for people to buy in and start to agglomerate their sites.
- Terry noted that as transformation starts to happen, there would be transfers of property. As part of an integrated mixed-use development, people may choose to sell their land because they see their land values increase as a result of the plan.
- Joe remarked that with current zoning allowing commercial rather than mixed-use or residential uses, land values may be higher now than would be the case with these zoning changes.
- David pointed out that if the shopping center were redeveloped, the axis into the Quadrangle could have retail, creating community-centered places.

Some analogs for thinking about Concord-Alewife:

Liz Langley presented a series of images for a variety of uses and densities including residential, mixed-use, retail centers, main streets, light industrial and R & D, open spaces, pedestrian/bicycle connections, and some ideas for improving the pedestrian quality of Blanchard Road.

- *Doug acknowledged the appeal of these ideas, but expressed concerns about increased traffic with the increased amount of retail.*
 - David noted a likely increase in traffic over time, and need to minimize that increase.
 - Current retail in the study area – which does generate a significant amount of traffic – not likely increase.
 - For any other development, objective to cut traffic increase as much as possible through appropriate land use – including smaller-scale, pedestrian-friendly, and community-focused retail.
 - When the Committee begins to form a more defined vision, will apply tests to understand traffic impacts, and then reform vision until we arrive at something workable..
- *Doug disagreed with the notion that increases in traffic are inevitable.*
 - David responded, rather than being pessimistic, we could be effective in reducing amount of traffic generated by development as of right (cf. Eastern Cambridge plan).
 - Stuart Dash added that through improvements, people's points of view might be shifted toward the citywide goal of increases in walking.
- *Ann Tennis asked whether the city had any plans for relocating the police headquarters or public works department to the area.*
 - Susan Glazer responded that there is some desire to relocate these uses, but was unsure when that might happen.
- *Peg was concerned that the images presented -- in particular the image of "traffic calming" on Blanchard -- was not appropriate for the realities of that roadway.*
- *Pat Goddard wanted to know more about the realities of Blanchard Road.*
 - Doug noted peak hour traffic jams at Blanchard; also requested that studies of speeding and truck travel at *off-peak hours* be included in the analysis.
 - David noted that in the future transit will be more of the equation than it is today.
- *Doug brought up the commuter rail stop as a way to bring people in by transit.*
- David responded that the consultants have started to investigate possibilities; so far, does not look very promising.

Next Steps:

Terry suggested that the two preliminary land use sketches be sent out to Committee members, giving everyone the chance to study them and bring them on the bus tour, scheduled for May 17, 10-12. Iram asked if the date of July 30th would work for people as the next Committee meeting after the community meeting on July 7th.

Final comments from David Dixon:

- Creative tensions will continue to be a part of the process.
- Many dimensions to the plan and its process: managing traffic, creating open spaces and connections, creating transit access. If process gets stuck on one of those aspects, nothing will come of study, leaving the market to dictate what happens in future.

Public Comment:

Mike Poppadolla: (that's not his name – any have the correct spelling??)

- Concern that Committee is focused greatly on what happens inside study area, while impacts will be felt by everyone even those outside the area. Traffic will be affecting adjacent areas
- Curious to know more about the numbers and what the scale of this is. Study area is significant part of Cambridge's developable area, and is near resource areas
- If there is development potential here, chance to bring infrastructure up to speed to deal with these flooding issues . (David Dixon responded that a planning goal should be to increase pervious surfaces in addition to whatever other infrastructure and utility improvements happen here.)
- Tri-Town meeting previous Tuesday outlined this area as being within a watershed area. Part of this area could be used for retention purposes, through possible voucher system to offset costs.
- Concern that without knowing what City Manager's wishes, plan could become a "wasted process" like the Trolley Square plan.

Steve Kaiser:

- Area is touching Belmont and Arlington; Committee should have representation from these towns.
- Validity of traffic numbers; he will be sharing the results of his traffic report with the Committee when it becomes available in about a month.
- Concerned about the connection over the rails and the outcome of an 1984 EIR that had recommended otherwise. (David Dixon responded that this was a pedestrian/transit-only connection.)
- "Fish Book" is an official document with some good ideas.
- The possibility that the shopping center could become a regional shopping entity is problematic.
- The possibility of "dead zones" like the non-housing elements at University Park and Kendall Square.
- Sewage issues and where the outfall of Mass Ave would be placed.

Another participant:

- Expressed concern that the Committee would not be addressing the issue of flooding and impact of new development. (Susan Glazer responded that a Catherine Woodbury is a representative from DPW working with this Committee throughout the process.)